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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: STRIPPED OF PARLIAMENTARY IMMUNITY,
FORMER PRIME MINISTER FACES CORRUPTION INDICTMENT

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) In a dramatic midnight session August 1, the Parliamentary Committee on Immunity revoked the parliamentary immunity of former Prime Minister and current opposition SDSM MP Vlado Buckovski. After being stripped of his immunity, Buckovski appeared in front of an investigative judge on August 3 to face corruption charges related to military equipment purchases made when he was Minister of Defense in **¶2001**. The Immunity Committee session appeared timed to make a media splash on August 2, Macedonia's National Day, and just a day before the Parliament begins its summer recess. Our initial assessment is that the government mishandled the case in an effort to score media and public approval points, and without having considered the negative impact the proceedings are likely to have on its reform goals and the development of democratic practices and institutions in Macedonia. End summary.

MIDNIGHT COMMITTEE REMOVES EX-PM BUCKOVSKI'S IMMUNITY

¶2. (SBU) In a late-night session which began August 1 and finished at 3 a.m. the next morning, the Parliamentary Immunity Committee voted to revoke the parliamentary immunity of former PM and current MP from the opposition SDSM Vlado Buckovski. Buckovski is charged with abuse of power during his tenure as Minister of Defense in 2001, and from 2002-2004. Specifically, Buckovski is implicated in the procurement of spare parts, at vastly inflated prices, for T-55 tanks donated by Bulgaria.

¶3. (SBU) The Immunity Committee's session came just a day after the well-publicized July 31 arrest of retired General Metodi Stamboliski, who served as CHOD during Buckovski's tenure at the helm of the Ministry of Defense (MOD). Stamboliski, two other high-level MOD officials, and the director of a large metals factory are co-defendants in the same case, and are accused of embezzling between 2-4 million Euros. In 2002, then-Minister of Interior Boskoski (currently on trial in The Hague for war crimes committed in 2001) filed similar criminal charges against Buckovski, but the case was dismissed.

BOTCHED PROCEDURE AND BAD TIMING

¶4. (SBU) Buckovski returned to Skopje voluntarily from his vacation in Greece to face the charges. He was briefly detained at the border and then participated in the Immunity Committee's heated session, where a 6-3 vote along party lines stripped him of his immunity. On August 3, Buckovski appeared before a Skopje investigative judge to answer the

charges against him. Around 200 SDSM supporters protested the action in front of the court.

15. (SBU) SDSM is vigorously criticizing the timing and the handling of the process. They see the action as a government attempt to drag Buckovski through the mud as part of its public campaign to demonstrate its commitment to combating corruption. SDSM does not recognize the decision of the Immunity Committee, citing procedural errors on the part of the VMRO-DPMNE committee chair. Reflecting SDSM's principled stance opposing the cavalier manner in which VMRO-DPMNE has approached parliamentary immunity issues, an influential SDSM contact tells us the party "is not protecting Buckovski, but we are protecting the MP." SDSM President Radmila Sekerinska, in the U.S. participating in a graduate studies program, announced on Macedonian radio August 2 that she would interrupt her studies to return to the country to lead the SDSM counter-attack.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) It appears the whirlwind events that started unfolding in this case just before Macedonia's National Day were deliberately planned, with the GOM hoping for a "big splash" media event that would underscore its commitment to combating corruption, regardless of how often the opposition is targeted for such efforts. In addition, the timing of the Immunity Committee vote seemed orchestrated to conclude just a day before the Parliament's and GOM's summer recess began, leaving little leeway for SDSM to counter-attack. (NOTE: The Immunity Committee can decide on the removal of an MP's immunity only if the full Parliament is not planning to hold a session in the next 15 days. Parliament's next session will be some time after August 20. END NOTE.)

17. (SBU) We and our EU and OSCE colleagues are closely

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monitoring this case, which the GOM appears to have mishandled. By trying to score media points and raise public approval ratings, the GOM does not seem to have assessed the negative impact the Buckovski case is likely to have on future VMRO-SDSM cooperation on important reform projects, such as completing the composition of the State Judicial Council. The GOM also may have done SDSM the unintended favor of giving the previously fractured Social Democrats a cause around which to unite, as reflected in unanimous SDSM opposition to the government's handling of the matter.

MILOVANOVIC